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I'm a Sahrawi who lives in Morocco

By Mohammed Ahmed Gain

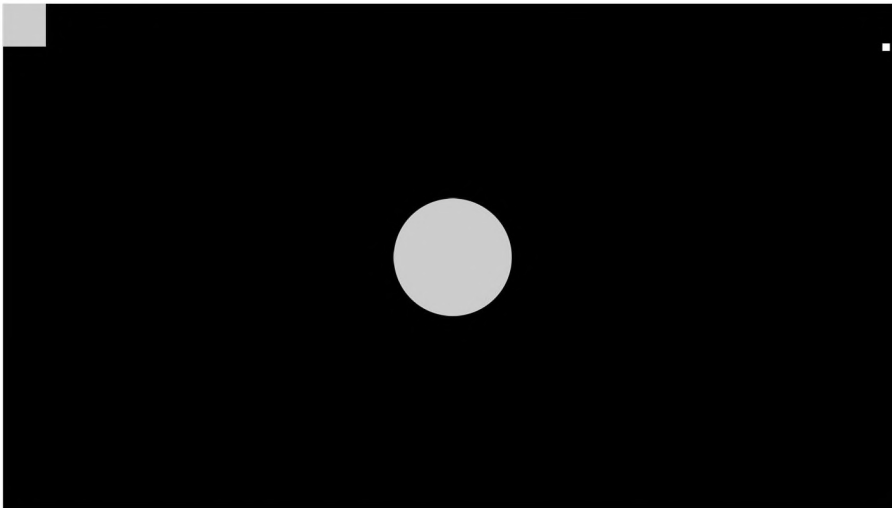
In late 2020, the United States negotiated a peace agreement between Israel and Morocco. In parallel, the U.S. legally recognized Morocco's claims to an area known as the Western Sahara. Since the peace deal's completion, critics have come out in full force: Some have said that the Western Sahara recognition tramples on the rights of the Sahrawi people who live there, and they've called for the Biden administration to undo it.

I am a Sahrawi, and I not only support the U.S.'s recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, but also believe that unraveling it could do irreparable harm to my people and to peace and stability in the region.

The Sahrawi have a long history of people speaking on our behalf who don't live in the territory and don't understand our situation. The Polisario Front — a separatist group created in 1973 and backed by the nearby country of Algeria — have claimed to speak for the Sahrawis for decades. The Polisario sell themselves well: they use international media to paint the Sahrawi people as aggrieved and attacked, and they portray themselves as freedom fighters valiantly standing up for Sahrawi rights.

Here's the harsh reality: like many mercenary groups, the Polisario's primary interest is in enriching themselves and their Algerian backers — not in helping the Sahrawis. Over the years, the Polisario have diverted aid intended for the Tindouf camps in Algeria, with the active complicity of Algerian officials who benefit from the embezzlement.

They've also badly mismanaged the region's refugee camps, which are home to thousands of Sahrawis. The conditions in these camps are tragic and dehumanizing, and they are a direct result of Polisario actions. The U.N. has regularly expressed concern about the fact that the Polisario — an armed non-state actor — run camps that should be run by a government. But there is little the U.N. or anyone else can do: the Polisario camps are the only refugee camps in the world where the U.N. has been denied the chance to run a census.



The Polisario and their Algerian backers are pushing for the U.S. to undo its recognition of Morocco's claims to the Western Sahara. That's because the longer the region remains "disputed," the less attention is paid to the Polisario's corruption and malfeasance, their pilfering of humanitarian supplies, and their unwillingness to negotiate. In short, if the "dispute" ends, the Polisario lose power and funding.

I and many Sahrawi are tired of being used as political pawns in a decades-long regional dispute. The U.S. took a critical step in the right direction by recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and supporting the Moroccan autonomy plan as a solution of compromise. They aren't the only nation to take such steps. More than twenty other countries have opened consulates in Western Sahara — a move that confirmed their recognition of Moroccan sovereignty.

What's more, over forty countries supported the autonomy solution under Moroccan sovereignty at an international conference co-hosted by the U.S. and Morocco in January. These countries made clear that the U.S. decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty advanced a search for a realistic, practicable, and enduring political solution.

That multi-country recognition reflects facts on the ground. Today, Sahrawis vote in Moroccan elections, and the region is administered by locally elected officials. The U.N. itself has recognized these democratically elected officials as the representatives of the people of the region. Furthermore, many Sahrawis have achieved success in business and government across the

kingdom. Our cultural heritage is also enshrined in the Moroccan Constitution. Far from being "an occupied people," we feel part and parcel of Moroccan life.

We're also eager to turn the page on this matter and build Western Sahara into what it could be. The Moroccan government has invested in that future by committing more than \$8 billion to the development of the region, including \$3 billion for Moroccan-based banks and hotels. The private sector has stepped up as well, with a U.S. wind energy and blockchain start-up announcing that it may set up an outpost here as well.



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The more countries that recognize Western Sahara as part of Morocco, the more such development will take place and the better off the people of this region will be. As a Sahrawi, I am encouraged by these efforts. My hope is that the world recognizes Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara — not just for Morocco's sake, but for the sake of the Sahrawi people.

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